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ABSTRACT

Common problems and possible solutions in communication with rural villagers in developing countries are discussed in terms of communication extension strategies, mass communication media, the use of simple communication technology in place of the more sophisticated and expensive methods, a case study of a successful communication project in Guatemala, the para-professional as a supporting interpersonal link between developing agencies and villagers, and communication satellites. Eight guidelines are included for developing an explicit communication strategy to be integrated into the overall project approach. (CMV)

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COMMUNICATING WITH VILLAGERS

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COMMUNICATING WITH VILLAGERS

Royal D. Colle

It is tragic that so much is known about how technically to cope with many of the problems in rural development, but that so little of that knowledge gets used in the hundreds of thousands of villages and small communities where much of the world's population lives.

Why is it that the Aborigines in New South Wales -- with many health services available to them -- often (to the detriment of their families) fail to use those health services? [1]

Why is it that the farmers in Mexico often did not adopt new agricultural practices although the practices were developed, tested, and promoted by agricultural experts? [2]

Why is it that women on a Guatemalan plantation preferred the traditional midwife (who often delivered tetanus as well as babies) to the more antiseptic and free trained nurse on the same plantation? [3]

Clearly there is a gap between those who control knowledge and services and those who need them. Efforts have been made to close the gap. For several decades, government ministries and departments, and universities have used extension agents to reach out with health, nutrition, agriculture and family planning services to rural families. However, the services -- and the education implicit in the services --

have rarely gone far enough beyond those families in villages more easily reached by road and canal. Furthermore, help has usually gravitated to the better-off families whose needs are already fairly well met. The "low end poor" and those off the main roads are left farther behind.

Communication strategies

The emphasis in this paper is more on information and communication than on services and commodities. They are, of course, all linked. Good communication may lead villagers to better ways of reaching, creating, or attracting services; to making better use of available resources; or to village level programs for self-help.

The fact that there are not enough adequately trained extension type people to work with hard-to-reach rural people in the traditional person-to-person pattern has led to some alternate strategies. For example, there has been an attempt in recent years to augment professional field workers with paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are given short-term training in more routine aspects of a professional's work. Often they are recruited from communitites much like those they will serve, and they themselves will be much like the persons they will serve. In addition to providing more contact, they provide a different quality of contact: they are more likely to convey information in a way their "clients" can understand.

There are different kinds of paraprofessionals, including nutrition aides (such as those in the United States), the "model farmers" (in the

Comilla rural development project in Bangladesh), village level workers (India and elsewhere); health and dental "promotores" (in Guatemala), etc.

Use of paraprofessionals has its drawbacks. Berg notes that:

> The personal transfer of information obviously has merit. But even assuming that person-to-person nutrition education translated to a large scale effort can sustain accuracy in its instruction and enthusiasm in its workers, it cannot overcome the basic limitation of person-to-person communication: the size of the audience. The number of persons in the lower socioeconomic groups that can be reached varies by country but is seldom great, especially in larger countries. The needy ordinarily do not participate in -- and often are not aware of -- activities from which they might benefit. To reach them would require an army of field workers -- in some cases diverted from other priorities -- and an army-like budget, requirements unlikely to be met by the already strained resources of most developing countries.[4]

And, furthermore, it is difficult to assume that person-to-person information transfer can sustain accuracy. Rahim mentions that the interpersonal network of communication in the Comilla project was adequate so long as the scope and coverage of the project were limited. "But with the expansion of the project," he says, "the interpersonal system was overloaded." According to Rahim, the Academy for Rural Development failed to develop "a mass media support system that could reduce the load on the interpersonal channels and minimize the distortion and loss of information that was transmitted by the managers and model farmers."[5]

Mass communication media

Unfortunately, various efforts to use mass media have been unsuccessful in reaching villagers. Sometimes it is a matter of literacy, for

many of those hard-to-reach villagers are "disliterate" -- that is, they are either not literate, or are not inclined to use their limited literacy. Sometimes it is a matter of timing. One of the difficulties Banerji notes in the Indian effort to use satellite relayed television to communicate to remote villages was the matter of diminishing attendance:

> Initially...men and women came to see the TV programmes in large numbers out of curiosity. But the attendance has now thinned down. One of the reasons is the timing of the programmes which do not suit the adults. When the programmes begin in daylight, the men are still in the fields and the women are busy with the household work. [6]

One of the major advantages of media such as radio and television is that a single message can be spread widely, swiftly, and at relatively low cost. But that is also a problem because it fails to take into consideration the great amount of variability in the cultural patterns of village people living in the same country. Agricultural products, cultivating practices, language, food consumption habits, forms of address, dialect, availability of services, etc. are only a few of the conditions which vary within even small geographic areas, and which are often important in designing effective communication strategies for rural development.

A very practical aspect is also the matter of electric power. While radio sets are generally transitorized and can operate on batteries, it will be a long time before power is available in a great many rural villages to permit use of television. One of the difficulties in the Indian satellite experiment was that of providing and maintaining

dependable electrical power to run village television sets.

Reaching villagers

Reaching villagers is not an easy task. It requires that an explicit communication strategy be woven into the overall project strategy. Guidelines for developing such a strategy might include the following: [7]

1. Encourage a communication system that is decentralized, i.e. one which fosters localized content.

2. Encourage local participation in the designing, planning, and implementing of non-formal education programs. Such participation should be linked with local social structure (e.g. community leaders, mothers' clubs, cooperatives, etc.).

3. The strategy should permit and encourage multi-focussed content rather than only agriculture, or only nutrition, or only family planning. Villagers seldom see their problems as neatly departmentalized as government agencies do.

4. Emphasis should be on preventative-type information rather than on cures.

5. There should be an emphasis on giving the villager more control over the part of the communication process which includes consumption of the message. This includes where, when, and frequency of exposure to messages.

6. The strategy should include arrangements for experts' participation in the communication system through the provision of support information services such as those which can be offered by central and regional units of government, as well as by other development-oriented enterprises.

7. The strategy should also include a means for efficient feedback systems which do not overload the capacity of those who must interpret the feedback.

8. The system should rely on simple communication technology as a means for gaining efficiency while maintaining local initiative and control.

Simple communication technology

Dramatic as modern sophisticated technology such as satellite and television may be for communicating with rural villages, communication strategies must rely for the most part on simple technology for the near future, perhaps for the next decade. [8] The stress must be on simple technology partly because of cost factors, partly because of its operational simplicity, partly because of power and logistics considerations, and partly because of the need to use information materials which can be patterned to local communities' needs. Inevitably, simple technology must take over much of that part of the change agent's role that was devoted to providing information and nonformal education directly to the ultimate consumer at the village level, and it must be used to provide these communication services in those villages which seldom, if ever, see field level workers.

In the three situations described below, the emphasis is on the use of audio cassette technology (ACT). In other circumstances, simple battery-operated projectors, crank-operated film loop viewers, blackboards, [9] or other facilities might fit the needs better. The important point is to select a medium that is appropriate to the situation.

Audio cassette technology has a combination of characteristics that make it particularly useful in the village setting. [10] For example, since it is audio, it is largely literacy-free, making it suitable for

"disliterate" people -- and especially for those who have strong oral communication traditions. It is relatively low cost, simple to operate, durable, and portable. Most cassette units can operate on electric mains power or standard size batteries.

The simplicity of ACT extends to production. Contemporary recording equipment makes it relatively easy to prepare tapes without sophisticated and expensive studios. This means that various versions of a message can be patterned to a particular locality without great cost. Also, an audio cassette system allows the listener endless repetition, something not convenient with radio and television stations or extension workers. It also provides the opportunity to have a system in which the listener controls when and where the message is heard. This also gives the content producer more freedom to develop content that may be sensitive in nature (e.g., in family planning) since it may be listened to in a context chosen by the listener.

Some of these advantages, and some of the strategy points mentioned earlier, may become more apparent with the several real life examples which follow.

The pila communication project [11]

This project was an attempt to provide information for families on a Guatemalan plantation that would help them cope better with health, nutrition and other problems of daily living. The first step was to ascertain the specific community needs as seen by experts and by the people themselves. Another step was to gather the information which would help meet those needs. In many cases, resources were already

available and it was largely a matter of linking these with the plantation families. Among those contributing to the information resources were a local agricultural store clerk, a local public health official, families on the plantation, and experts in the capital city.

It was important to study the community to discover the best way to provide the information to the families. Because women gather for up to two hours daily at the three local pilas (outdoor community laundering centers), it was decided that this might be a good spot to set up a cassette tape player. Content was produced in such a way as to make it interesting as well as informative. Thus, the recordings, made with non-professional talent, included serial dramas (soap operas and novelas), music appropriate to the audience, (including some by a local plantation music group), interviews with experts on development-related subject matter and with plantation people on both development-related and "human interest" topics. Fifteen different tapes (30 minutes each) were made, and each day a different tape was played and repeated over a period of several hours. Setting up and running the operation daily was a 15-year-old girl from the plantation.

The results: people at the pila listened, learned and acted according to the information provided. The project was a success because the content was interesting and was cast in a style and format congenial to the listeners, it related to the families' needs, suggested actions that could be undertaken in that community, and the system was patterned to community living patterns. The project is now being expanded to additional plantations through the creation of an indigenous communication cooperative. [12]

Supporting the interpersonal link

Considerable emphasis will continue to be placed on the use of paraprofessionals as a link between development agencies and village people. How can the effectiveness of these people be increased so that they can reach more people with a wider range of material?

Consider the Comilla Rural Development Project.[13] The basic development organization is the cooperative. The nerve center of the Comilla program is the weekly meeting of each village cooperative and the weekly training class of the various cooperatives' representatives at the thana* center called Thana Training and Development Center (TTDC). A new pattern of development-oriented communication has been evolved in Comilla through the establishment of these two institutions--the TTDC and the Cooperatives.

The TTDC consists of a number of subject-matter specialists (in agriculture, plant protection, livestock, fishery, family planning etc.) posted by different nation-building departments of the government. These specialists have been assigned a new role of teacher.

At the village level, people join in a special interest cooperative which has meetings of its members each week. Each cooperative has about 50 families. Its manager, elected by the

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*The thana is an administrative unit averaging about 125 square miles in area. It contains 200-300 villages. About five or six thanas make a "sub-division" and three or four sub-divisions make a "district." Bangladesh has 19 districts.

members (and in the case of an agricultural cooperative, a "model farmer"), joins representatives of cooperatives from other villages each week at the TTDC. The lessons imparted by the experts at the TTDC are reported to the villagers regularly by the manager and the model farmer in the weekly meeting of their village cooperative. Discussions follow each reporting, and the feedback is reported back to the experts the following week. This is a continuous process and the training continues month after month, year after year. The system is almost entirely dependent on oral presentations. In the Kotwali thana of Comilla, this center is located at the Avoy Ashram. Rahim describes how the system works:

> This was an active center where hundreds of villagers came every week to attend business meetings and training classes... The main participants were the managers, model farmers and occasionally, the chairmen and accountants of the village cooperative societies. The Avoy Ashram was the main center of communication between the project officials (the change agents) and the representatives of the village cooperatives (the client population).
>
> The basic idea behind the communication and educational activities at the Avoy Ashram was that the meetings and discussions in a disciplined situation would not only facilitate two-way communication but would contribute to behavioral change. Ideas and information would flow from the experts to the villagers in a continuous manner and immediate feedback would occur. The group discussions (of the villagers) would help to create consensus. The village leaders would become effective local communicators; they would go back to the village every week and transmit the ideas and information to other members in village meetings and personal conversations. Similarly, the leaders would carry back ideas and information to the experts at the Avoy Ashram. The contents of the communication would always relate to the current or proposed development activities.[14]

In actual operation, that link between the villagers and the training center change agents has been a fragile one because it has depended on a human communication system whose reliability is strained by the demands made on it and by the variations in competence and reliability of persons providing the linkage. Sometimes, too, the differing needs of the villages made the Avoy Ashram training sessions irrelevant to particular needs of the different villages.

Simple technology could strengthen a basically good system to provide villagers with accurate information when they need it. For example, a training center could develop a resource of cassette tapes on information most needed by villagers at some time or other -- tapes on agricultural practices, marketing, credit, health, nutrition, family planning, etc. As a village cooperative needed the information, its manager could borrow the appropriate tape from the resource collection to play at the cooperative's meeting. (One side of the tape could provide suggestions to the manager on how best to conduct a discussion on the topic.) Use of cassette tapes could ensure a high degree of accuracy of the message originating at the TTDC and minimize the loss of information. It could also reduce the load on the interpersonal channel (i. e., the cooperatives' representatives) in the Comilla project, and make the discussion of the village meetings more interesting and lively.

Furthermore, since the training center has a staff of experts in various development-related fields, it should also be possible for the village representative to ask the experts questions related to a specific village problem, or questions arising from the village discussions -- and the answers could be recorded on cassette tape and played back for the villagers. In addition, training sessions at the Avoy Ashram might be made livelier by having village representatives record questions and comments of villagers for discussion in the thana training sessions. Capturing these kinds of exchanges on tape may provide a more authentic and intimate communication exchange than a system mediated by paper or messengers.

Satellites, broadcasting and local institutions

Rural development and nonformal education programs run into many problems in nations such as Indonesia where it is extremely difficult for government departments to reach villages made remote by jungles, mountains, water and other geographic obstacles. And there is the human obstacle. Often field level workers simply do not like, do not have the inclination to, and do not have the time to visit the poorer villages -- at least not frequently enough to make a difference.

A recent proposal for a rural development program in Indonesia would link the nation's new communication satellite, the existing radio facilities, and a kecamatan (sub-district) educational resource center into a system which would provide rapid diffusion of information from its important national centers to communities thousands of miles away. It would also

institute an arrangement for adapting that information and creating other localized materials for use at the village level.[15] It bears some resemblance to the Comilla plan discussed above in that the message delivery system consists of an arrangement whereby village leaders, school teachers, women's clubs and others could borrow pre-recorded tapes from the community development agency (PENMAS) at the kecamatan* at a time most convenient and appropriate for the village. The tapes would be especially designed to promote self-help efforts for in-service teacher training, school instruction, agriculture, nutrition, preventive health care, etc. The emphasis on village self-help and local institutions is twofold: first, it will be a very long time before there are enough regular extension agents from the Department of Agriculture, Education and Culture, Health and other government agencies to reach down into those thousands of villages. And second, because of the tremendous diversity of agricultural, language and cultural conditions, it will be extremely difficult to convey information that will be appropriate (both in timing and content) to meet the diverse needs. Thus, satellites might serve more effectively as a link between the center and the regions, rather than as a means for delivering information directly from the center to villagers. The latter would be dramatic, but in development terms, it is unlikely to be effective enough to warrant the effort and cost. Radio broadcasting is important as a channel

*The political/geographic units in Indonesia from largest to smallest include: nation, province, kabupaten (district), kecamatan (sub-district), and desa (village).

both for relaying signals to the kecamatan centers and for direct communication to villages. It does not, however, perform the same function as the kecamatan resource center equipped with simple communication technology.

Thinking small

Many national policies now make it imperative to give attention to those many people who have for so long gone without adequate resources for coping with daily problems of food, shelter, and health. The problem is obviously an immense one and the temptation is to use some massive technique which -- like waving a wand -- would solve everything at once. The challenge to those officials who occupy important posts in government ministries and departments is to look seriously at the communication context of those villages which are now rarely touched by extension workers, those villages without power for television sets, without suitable language or literacy skills to make use of printed publications, without adequate facilities for therapeutic and curative services, without roads or other transportation infrastructure -- but with critical needs for assistance in defining their problems in terms which will help them design and carry out some of the solutions.

And it takes more than the spare-time efforts of an agronomist, a doctor, or a nutritionist to develop a communication plan. Nor is the hardware or production technician person the answer. It takes a communication specialist. The development team needs a full time communication specialist as a member.

Such a close examination may reveal that reaching villages is not so much a matter of dramatic new satellites, television programs, professionally-produced radio programs, and multi-colored publications -- but simple, easy-to-use technology which, creatively used, will help stretch the impact of extension people, make more visible existing community resources, and provide villagers themselves the challenge and opportunity to play a decisive role in their own development.[16]

Footnotes

1. See Max Kamien, "Cultural Chasm and Chaos in the Health Care Services to Aborigines in Rural New South Wales," Medical Journal of Australia, Special Supplement, 1975, 2:6-11.

2. See William F. Whyte, The Social Lessons of Project Puebla, Center for International Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., 1975 (lithographed).

3. See Royal D. Colle, with Susana Fernandez de Colle, The Pila Communication Project, Final Report, Department of Communication Arts, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1976; and by the same authors, Communication at the Pila, The Ford Foundation, New York, 1976.

4. Alan Berg, The Nutrition Factor -- Its Role in National Development, The Brookings Institute, Washington, 1973, p. 79.

5. Syed A. Rahim, Communication and Rural Development in Bangladesh, East-West Communication Institute, Honolulu, 1976, p. 55.

6. Anjan Kumar Banerji, "Satellite Instructional Television Experiment," paper prepared for the Program of Advanced Study on Communication Technology in a Changing Society: Explorations in Institutional Reactions -- New Understanding in Communication. East-West Communication Institute, Honolulu, 1976, p. 12.

7. Recent publications which deal more extensively with these points include Royal D. Colle, "Communication Systems and the New Rural Development Strategies," paper prepared for the Summer Program of Advanced Study on Communication Technology in a Changing Society: Explorations in Institutional Reactions -- New Understanding in Communication. East-West Communication Institute, 1976; Rural Development Committee, Expanded Rural Development, Center for International Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1974; Integrated Communication, A Report on the International Conference on Integrated Communication for Rural Development, East-West Communication Institute, Honolulu, 1974; Heli E. Ennis de Sagasti, Effective Communication with the Rural Poor (Executive Summary), Academy for Educational Development, Washington, 1975; David R. Evans, "Technology in Nonformal Education, a Critical Appraisal," Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1976 (lithographed); and John P. Lewis, "Newer Concepts of Development Strategy: Their Bearing on Education and Communications," Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., 1976 (lithographed).

8. This point is discussed in greater detail in Royal D. Colle, The Frontiers of Communication, in Communication Strategies for Rural Development, Proceedings of the Cornell-CIAT International Symposium, Cali, Colombia, 1974.

9. Jack Glattbach, The Moalboal Times, Cycle (The Ford Foundation), New York, 1975.

10. A more extensive discussion of the characteristics and uses of audio cassette technology as a communication medium particularly in rural development can be found in the author's CSCS: An Experimental System for Communicating with Hard-to-Reach People, Papers in Communication, No. 1, Department of Communication Arts, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 1973; and "ACT: a New King of Communication," Educational Broadcasting International, The British Council, Vol. 8, No. 2, (June, 1975).

11. In addition to the items mentioned in footnote 3, this project is discussed in Royal D. Colle and Susana Fernandez de Colle, The Communication Factor in Health and Nutrition Programs, A Case Study from Guatemala, World Health Organization, Geneva, 1976. The pila project was carried out by the authors with the support of the Department of Communication Arts at Cornell University and the Pan American Health Organization.

12. See Royal D. Colle, "Why Not a Communication Cooperative?" forthcoming.

13. For an excellent description and discussion of the Comilla project, see Syed A. Rahim, Communication and Rural Development in Bangladesh. M. Ghulam Sattar, Public Relations Officer of The Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, make helpful suggestions for this section of the paper.

14. Rahim, p. 44.

15. For a more complete description of this proposal, see Royal D. Colle, "Communication Systems and the New Rural Development Strategies."

16. That villagers do accept the challenge and can be successful is illustrated by the results of projects reported by Rahim (p. 47) and by Lawrence Kincaid and others in Mothers' Clubs and Family Planning in Rural Korea: The Case of Cryu Li, East-West Center Communication Institute, Honolulu, 1976. Similar local institutions exist in rural villages throughout the developing world.